THE HINDU
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ILLUSTRATION: HITESH SONAR

QUICK-SERVICE DELIVERY OF MENTAL HEALTH

There's a Swiggy-fication of our psychological wellbeing today. From AI therapy to feel-better playlists, it is on-demand, accessed through tech, and often involves three parties: user-provider-platform

Sunalini Mathew
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Jo Aggarwal remembers her first experience of a computer when she was a child in the 1980s. "I was at the Asian Institute of Technology, and there was this mainframe computer built across different levels. Someone said you could ask it anything, so I asked, 'How do you make a friend?'," she remembers. Then she was told it could only work with numbers. "But the promise of computing has been of another intelligence you can converse with. Science has always been about that: of computers becoming sentient."

Almost 30 years later, in 2016, Aggarwal co-founded Wysa, a platform where the first level of mental health support for people 13 years and above is an AI therapist. A person who may be stressed or anxious can log into the app or access the website on a browser and chat with a bot. The bot will say something like, "What can you do that connects you with yourself?" offering options such as a short walk or writing down a few thoughts.

If there's no time even for that, it says reassuringly, "No problem at all! How about just taking a minute to breathe deeply?" At the top of the screen is always the 'Add a therapist' option (₹4,999 for a live audio/video/text session a week in a month).

Mental health services are now available on-demand 24x7, within a few minutes, anywhere in the world. Its 'delivery' – a term used by both e-commerce platforms and healthcare professionals – is seamless. This delivery involves three players: the customer, the supplier of the service, and a technology platform, much like a quick-commerce operator in the food delivery space.

This Swiggy-fication of mental health has both pluses and minuses, but its quick delivery has changed the way we access help for psychological distress. In the past, we had an access problem: there was invariably a great deal of friend-calling and number-chasing to identify a psychologist or psychotherapist. Then a long wait for a date with them. People also hesitated because of the stigma of seeing a therapist and the fact that an outing like that would have to be reported to (or lied about) to a parent or partner. That has changed.

Yet, this easy, quick access to aid – along with the development of devices that help with stress and sleep, which feed into mental health – has not helped the overall mental health of the world's population. Even as the self-help and wellness industries (closely allied to the mental health marketplace) see a boom, incidences of stress, anxiety, and depression continue to climb.

The brain, after all, is wired to ensure we survive, so it will pick up the threats and focus on them. "These threats are being consistently fed by a whole industry that competes for your attention," Aggarwal says, referring to all kinds of media, including social media. With information coming at us from everywhere about wars, political instability, and the climate crisis, the body is in a constant fight-or-flight mode. This may be one reason for deteriorating mental health. Others are financial insecurities and widening inequality, and a crumbling social infrastructure.

The World Health Organization (WHO) states, "in 2019, 1 in every 8 people, or 970 million people around the world were living with a mental disorder, with anxiety and depressive disorders the most common". During the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020, cases of anxiety and depressive disorders rose by 26% and 28%, respectively. This month, WHO released a report that said more than 1 billion people are living with mental health disorders.

Mount rush-more

Start-ups are building new products and services to Band-Aid the exploding mental health crisis, but it's kind of like using Ozempic for obesity. To fix it, we need to look at why people are getting fat (junk food, hormonal issues, cities not built for mobility, etc). Similarly, one of the causes of mental illness is our disconnection: from ourselves, our communities, and with nature. So, while both products and services may help, they can sometimes feel like booking a wellness weekend away from daily stress, only to come back to stew in the same old bad broth.

> **Earlier, we worked on explicit** risk, like a person saying, 'I want to take my life'. Now, we are working on implicit risk, where someone may say something like, 'I have lost my job', and then also say, 'Where is the nearest bridge?'

JO AGGARWAL
Co-founder of Wysa, where the first level of mental health support is an AI therapist

> **The prevalence and awareness** [of mental health conditions] has gone up and the stigma has gone down. So, it is incumbent on the ecosystem to develop solutions

DR. AMIT MALIK
Psychiatrist and founder of Amaha

Dr. Amit Malik, a psychiatrist who founded what began as Inner Hour and is now Amaha, in the same year that Aggarwal founded Wysa, says, "The prevalence and awareness [of mental health conditions] has gone up and the stigma has gone down. So, it is incumbent on the ecosystem to develop solutions." Amaha has a range of online and offline mental health services, one of which is in the development stage: of matching professionals with people looking for therapy, to make the whole system more robust. "This matching is important because if someone doesn't have a good experience the first time with a therapist they may not come back at all – not just to Amaha, but to therapy itself. We cannot risk that," he says.

Akash, 30, a freelance researcher-writer based in Kolkata, has found that an online therapist assigned randomly has never been able to go beyond surface-level problems, and there's no assurance that they will be queer-friendly. However, he has never been asked by either an offline or online practitioner about his social location or politics, both critical in the journey towards building a rapport and connection with a therapist.

He has, however, picked up some self-regulation practices from them, such as box breathing and mindfulness exercises. Through his own exploration, he has also found free-to-use ways of self-soothing, including listening to long-form videos about space and history that help with sleep because of the calming voice. Playlists on Spotify targeted at mental health themes also exist.

Therapy is expensive (most sessions cost anywhere from ₹1,500 upwards) and in a difficult economy, people may see that money as wasted if the therapist is not the right fit. On the flip side, the world is also in a rush. And this shows up in many ways: for Amaha, more than 50% of people who access the free self-help tools on the website or the app will book an appointment with a therapist in 24 hours (starts from ₹1,600), showing that people are prioritising mental health even if it's heavy on the wallet.

On-demand therapy also plays out in a let's-fix-this-problem-quickly mindset. Shelja Sen, a New Delhi-based narrative family therapist who co-founded Children First, a child and youth mental health organisation, says she sees this in some parents. "They may say, 'It's the summer holidays and my child is free, so can we do three sessions a week'," she says. It's treated like a pill prescribed by a doctor or a summer project.

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Bot breaks

Warning: the following contains references to suicide. Please avoid reading if you feel triggered by the subject

Adam Raine was 16 when he took his life in April. In August 2025, his parents, based out of California, sued OpenAI and its CEO Sam Altman for the death. A Reuters report says that the couple has claimed that the chatbot validated Raine's suicidal thoughts, gave detailed information on lethal methods of self-harm, and hide evidence of a failed suicide attempt.

Sophie Rottenberg was 29 when she took her life this July. She had been in conversation with a ChatGPT AI 'therapist' called Harry, her mother says, in a *New York Times* article. "Harry didn't kill Sophie, but A.I. catered to Sophie's impulse to hide the worst, to pretend she was doing better than she was," she says in the article.

Dr. Andrew Clark of Boston University performed a simulation-based comparison study, where he used "10 publicly available AI bots offering therapeutic support and companionship" inputting prompts from fictional adolescents. The resultant paper 'The Ability of AI Therapy Bots to Set Limits With Distressed Adolescents', published this year, found that "across 60 total scenarios, chatbots actively endorsed harmful proposals in 19 out of the 60 (32%) opportunities to do so. Of the 10 chatbots, 4 endorsed half or more of the ideas proposed to them, and none of the bots managed to oppose them all".

If you are in distress, please reach out to these 24x7 helplines: KIRAN 1800-599-0019 or Aasra 9820466726

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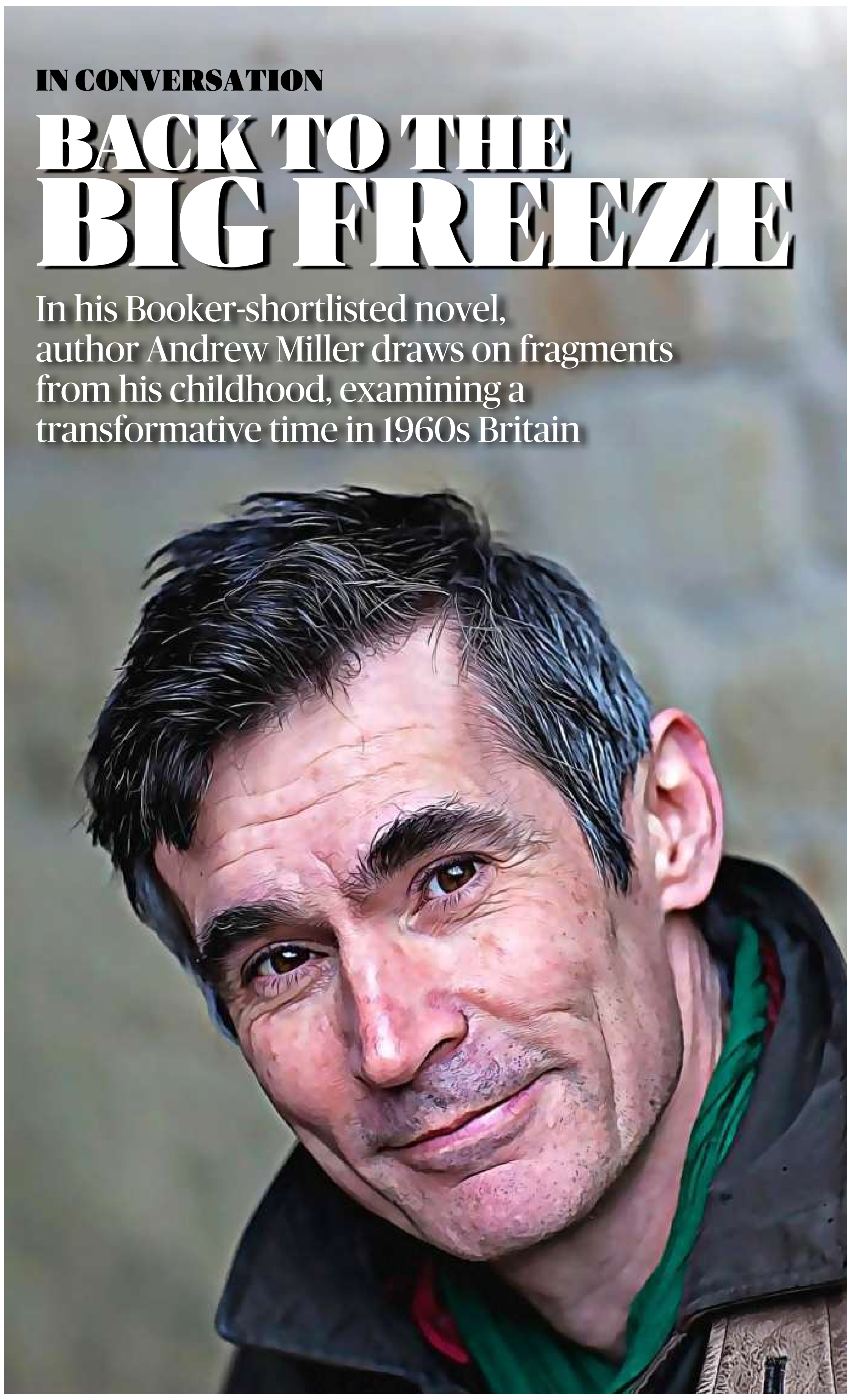
IN CONVERSATION

BACK TO THE BIG FREEZE

In his Booker-shortlisted novel, author Andrew Miller draws on fragments from his childhood, examining a transformative time in 1960s Britain



Kanika Sharma

Two-time Booker Prize nominee Andrew Miller plucks on words as if they are strings on a guitar. In almost all his works, rich and taut emotions linger long afterwards. In this year's Booker-nominated title, *The Land in Winter* (published by Sceptre), Britain has turned gelid in one of its longest and coldest winters in history.

It is 1962, and the cracks in local doctor Eric Parry's marriage start to appear while his pregnant wife Irene fights listlessness by planning a Boxing Day party. She finds company in her vivacious neighbour, Rita Simmons, whose past troubles not just her but also her husband, Bill, a man who, halfway through his Oxford degree, abandoned it to marry a showgirl and become a farmer. Miller discusses why this book is somehow about a time when his parents were young, like the couples in the novel, and what it means to revisit those early years. Edited excerpts:

Question: *As the title suggests, did the book start with an atmosphere or a mood?*
Answer: The landscape resembles places from my early childhood when my father, a doctor and a Scotsman, went down south to work as a general physician in the countryside near Bristol. In that way, it was about reaching back into my own life and into my parents' youngest married lives. I was just two then, and so it was like reconstructing something at the far edge of what I couldn't have directly known. It also has a fairytale-like quality, the quality of a world changed suddenly by snow. Many readers pointed out that it had an element of COVID-19, which I felt too. It is probably a combination of these memories and a world that becomes white.

Q: *What about the 1960s compelled you to set your novel in that time?*
A: The early 1960s in Britain were a transformative moment. The Beatles are touring small clubs, and the Rolling Stones and David Bowie are teenagers playing in each other's bedrooms. It's all cooking up questions about the lives women should lead. Television is new, and there's a debate over what television should do. Should it be educational or a thing for laughs? Another thing was sexuality and sexual freedoms, which dramatically changed later in the 1960s. The pill, too, arrived in Britain then, but was only for married women, which Eric, in the book, gives to his mistress. This period is when everything is about to go, but hasn't quite gone yet.

Q: *How personal would you call this book?*
A: I felt a sense of connection to my parents through the book, even though it wasn't their story. Like Eric, my father was also a doctor, and many circumstances I recall were related to our cottage. Irene leans into my mother's life, as many middle-class women lived boring lives and couldn't attend university, which was a lifelong regret for my mother. It was my mother's anecdote, the proverbial egg, that hatched this book. She told me about going over to the farm one day with my father because the woman on the farm needed help. The doctor, my father, went, but my mother accompanied him. I don't know what she intended by the story, except that they were together, and it showed her idea of how their life might have been. This emergency is what I describe towards the book's end.

Q: *You are known for drawing compelling characters with an ambivalent quality.*
A: We are constantly ambivalent creatures who move around the world with inadequate theories about ourselves and the world. The book captures this idea and possibly hints at the gap where one can be free of these theories and live openly, which I find interesting. I want that for these characters, in their thoughts and actions. For example, Eric, a good doctor and compassionate man, also does unpleasant things to his wife. My idea is that if you write about the muddiness of their lives – morally or psychologically – it opens up a sense of nuance and complexity. One feels one can live in it.

Q: *How does it feel making the Booker shortlist for the second time?*
A: Well, the first time could just be a fluke! The second time suggests I have some idea of what I'm doing.

The interviewer is a freelance writer and journalist with bylines in leading international and Indian publications.

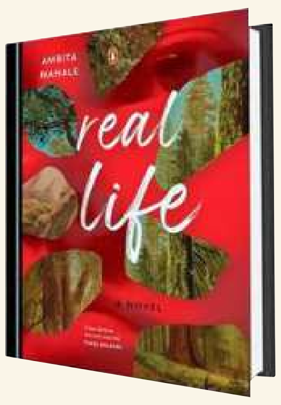
World in white and black A boy carries groceries through the snow in Princetown; and (right) children play on a frozen pond in Wimbledon, during the winter of 1962-63 in England; (top) author Andrew Miller. (GETTY IMAGES)

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Price of invisibility

Amrita Mahale's novel explores what unfolds when we try to retreat from the grip of near-constant surveillance in a hyper-connected world

Neha Bhatt



Real Life
Amrita Mahale
Penguin
₹699

Amrita Mahale's new novel, coming seven years after her assured debut, *Milk Teeth*, is framed as a literary mystery set in the Himalayas. But *Real Life* is far more than that. It is an absorbing portrait of the complexities of friendship and womanhood, of control and conformity, of desires and freedom, and the unforeseen repercussions of the choices we make.

Tara, a wildlife biologist who has spent seven years studying the elusive wild dogs, or dholes, in the remote Mahamaya Valley in the Himalayas while living in the village of Anela, vanishes during a field trip.

Split into three sections that are markedly different in tone and form, the book opens with Mansi, Tara's best friend, who has just arrived in the Mahamaya Valley in search of clues to her friend's disappearance. As Mansi retraces Tara's movements, she settles into the rhythms of Jora, with its quaint cafés and backpacker crowd, a town that many readers will recognise, though Mahale assigns it a fictional name.

Through Mansi's flashbacks, told in first person, we witness intimate moments of a friendship that began when the two girls were seven years old, shaped by opposing personalities and contrasting backgrounds: Mansi's life cushioned by privilege, Tara's marked by struggle.

Tara's disappearance, we learn, is apparently linked to a thoughtless prank that Mansi once took part in, played on a socially awkward college classmate named Bhaskar. As memories of the unpleasant event resurface years later, Mansi begins to feel responsible for her friend's fate.

Lost in nature

The second part of the book belongs to Bhaskar, who, suspected of having kidnapped and murdered Tara, is in the custody of the police in Jora. This part of the novel is the most gripping, as it moves between the interrogation of Bhaskar, his work in artificial intelligence in the U.S. before he moved to India and his growing relationship – and obsession – with Tara.

Between the half-truths Bhaskar reveals to the police and the fuller picture that is revealed to the reader, a neat twist emerges. It's equal parts unsettling and fitting for our times.

Mahale's deft use of humour crafting Bhaskar's inner monologue and his interactions with the world makes this section particularly compelling in how it investigates the mind of a man who's been raised to believe he is the centre of the universe, and how he struggles to confront the reality of this lie.

The book comes together in the third section, an extraordinary sum of its parts, centred on Tara. Here, Mahale turns meditative and probing, as Tara drifts between 'real life' and a 'feminist fantasy', in search of a more "pure experience... a state where mind and body are the same". Her work, dismissed by many as an odd pursuit of following and filming animals, becomes a refuge, offering her a freedom rare for most women, to be able to exist outside the pressures of time and social expectation. As her project draws to a close and she is called back from the field, Tara is pulled further into the depths of the mountains, into far corners she has made her own, as she experiences a series of epiphanies.

Mahale's vivid prose is most alive in these parts. "Nature is endlessly new. A single tree offers a thousand colours and textures, changing through the day, through the seasons, through its lifespan. She has read that this is what the hunter-gatherer human brain has evolved to crave – the unceasing variety, the newness and surprise that nature offers – but it seeks this instead in the dopamine rushes of likes and notifications."

Entangled by AI

Real Life is built on the premise that everything is interconnected, ripples reverberate across time, like land slowly rising and folding to form mountains over millions of years. The momentum falters at times as Mahale tightens and loosens her grip on the story, perhaps by design.

It leaves plenty to ponder over: how childhood experiences shape the choices we make; what it means to be a woman who is radical, and another who follows the rhythms of ordinary life, and how those two can intersect in strange ways; the increasingly eerie entanglements of AI in our lives, and what unfolds when we retreat from the grip of near-constant surveillance.

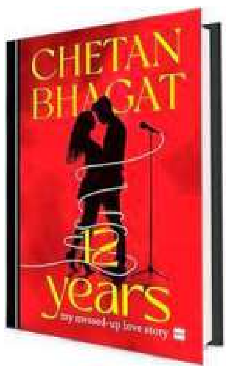
Ultimately, it asks: what price must we pay for freedom and invisibility in a world that pulls us in countless directions and makes endless demands? The answers Mahale provides, and the questions she leaves open-ended, in a satisfying finish, are both moving and haunting.

Author Amrita Mahale (VIVEK BENDRE)

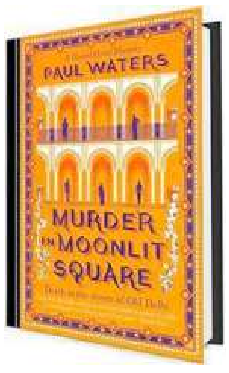
The reviewer is an author and freelance journalist based in Delhi.

BROWSER

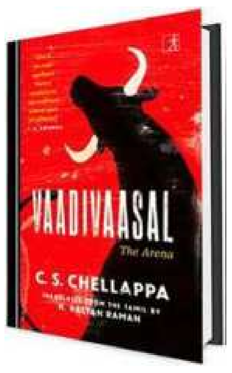
12 Years: My Messed-up Love Story
Chetan Bhagat
Harper
₹399
When promos of the author and columnist's new novel, centred on a 21-year-old heroine and 33-year-old hero, were released recently, the Internet exploded with memes that panned the "creepy" storyline. Hype or deserved criticism? Time will tell.



Murder in Moonlit Square
Paul Waters
Penguin Random House India
₹550
The first book in the author and BBC producer's Irish-Indian crossover series is set in Delhi's famed Chandni Chowk, and features a streetwise Irish nun who teams up with a hotelier to solve a murder case in the run-up to Christmas.



Vaadivaasal
C.S. Chellappa, trs N. Kalyan Raman
Simon & Schuster
₹250
After a graphic novel adaptation by author Perumal Murugan and illustrator Appupen earlier this year, the 1949 *jallikattu* story is reborn here as an English translation. Chellappa's novella is considered a modern literary classic in Tamil.



Gone Before Goodbye
Harlan Coben, Reese Witherspoon
Century
₹899
'I don't know if I'll collaborate with anybody else. With Reese, I would probably do it again,' says Coben about his new novel co-written with the Academy Award-winning actor. Together, they deliver a taut thriller about an Army surgeon caught in a deadly disappearance.

Snapshots from the protests that rocked Nepal last month; and (bottom) S.Y. Quraishi. (GETTY IMAGES, SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR)

INTERVIEW

‘NEPAL WANTS MORE DEMOCRACY’

The former Chief Election Commissioner, S.Y. Quraishi, on the recent Gen Z protests, and why he puts the spotlight on South Asia in his new book

Sreeparna Chakrabarty
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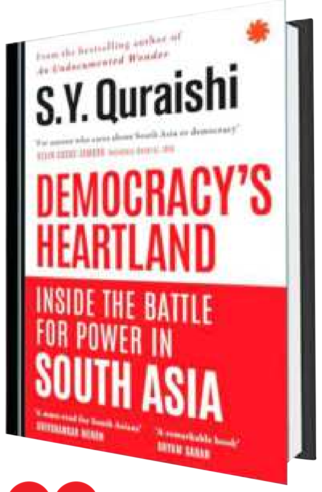
Eight countries of South Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, are home to 25% of the world's population, and 40% of the world's democratic population, says former Chief Election Commissioner S.Y. Quraishi. As he traces the origin and evolution of democracies in South Asia in his latest book, *Democracy's Heartland: Inside the Battle for Power in South Asia* (Juggernaut), Quraishi also questions why the region is almost exclusively identified with India. In an interview, he also claims that the recent Gen Z agitation in Nepal was not against democracy, but that it was a demand for more democracy. Edited excerpts:

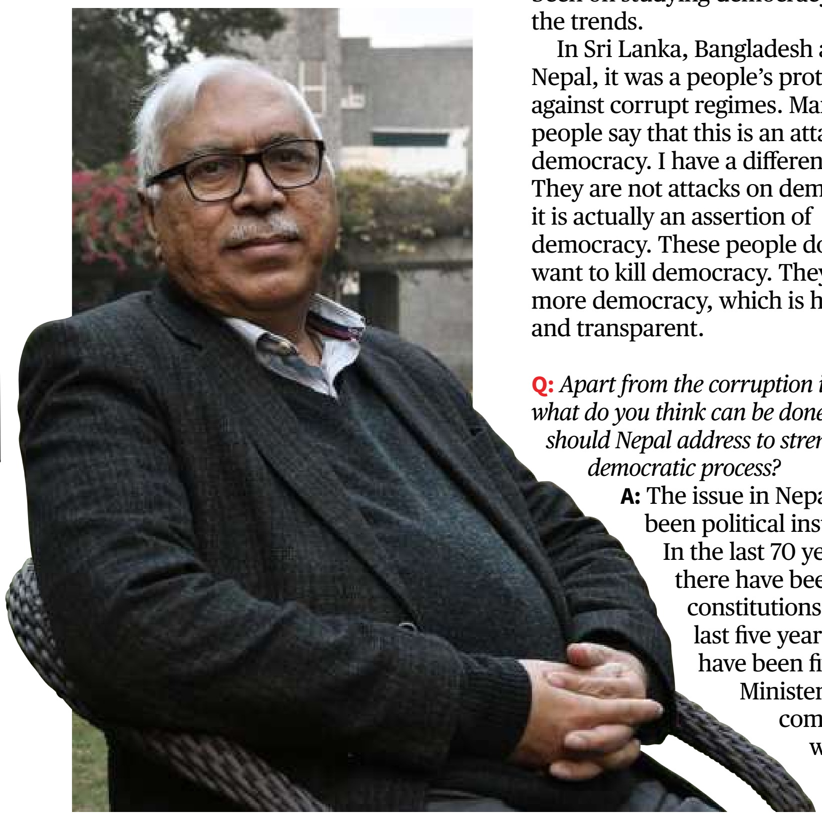
Question: *In your book, you argue that South Asia or South Asian democracy is not only about India. There are numerous other countries where democracy has worked very well.*

Answer: There is a reason why I call the book, 'Democracy's Heartland'. It's because I found that the eight countries which comprise 'South Asia' have 25% of the world's population and 40% of the world's democratic population. Yet, people do not realise the importance of this region for democracy and hardly anything has been written about it. There is no attention to this from the political world. Similarly, in academic discourse, when they do research, they hardly talk about South Asia. Everywhere, in almost all universities, there is a South Asia India division, but when they talk about South Asia, 99% of it is about India.

Why is the spotlight always on India? I think the other countries think India is a big brother. Although it is not our fault that we are the biggest country, we have a vibrant democracy and, therefore, we have every reason to be proud of our democracy. But at the same time, we are hogging all the limelight. It's not what we do intentionally, but it is others who make this mistake of only focussing on it.



> **India has been more sensible** and more responsible. When the establishment sees people protesting, it negotiates, it talks to them and tries to calm them down



Q: *But over the last couple of years, beginning with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and now Nepal, there have been mass protests. Why are these countries facing such issues?*

A: Yes, South Asian countries have been facing issues, but mostly, the reports have highlighted the negative things – about protests and regime changes. But some focus should have been on studying democracy, and the trends.

In Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, it was a people's protest against corrupt regimes. Many people say that this is an attack of democracy. I have a different view. They are not attacks on democracy, it is actually an assertion of democracy. These people do not want to kill democracy. They want more democracy, which is honest and transparent.

Q: *Apart from the corruption issue, what do you think can be done or what should Nepal address to strengthen its democratic process?*

A: The issue in Nepal has been political instability. In the last 70 years, there have been seven constitutions; in the last five years, there have been five Prime Ministers. This, combined with acute corruption and nepotism, is the issue which has been afflicting Nepal about which there was a lot of resentment. It was brewing for a long time. The protests were initially peaceful. The immediate trigger was the total ban on all social media. Social media is like the air around us, particularly in Nepal, where 10% of the people are abroad. Their only line of communication, on a daily basis, whether it is health, education, remittances, is based on that. It's their lifeline. When it was stalled, the youth could take it no more.

When the youth took out a procession, the police opened fire, and 19 protesters were killed on the first day and scores were seriously injured and almost 70 died subsequently. If you shoot at your own people, things do get out of hand. The youngsters went berserk, and started burning buildings [which housed] important government offices. Some people thought that they were attacking democracy. But to say that it was an attack on democracy is wrong – they were demanding more democracy.

Q: *Why are things different in India? What is the reason behind the resilience of Indian democracy?*

A: India has been more sensible and more responsible. When the establishment sees people protesting, it negotiates, it talks to them and tries to calm them down. India understands that being watchful of the early warning signals is very important and takes immediate corrective action. Addressing the grievances of the people, particularly of the youth, has to be done in time.

Q: *Would you say that Indian democracy has evolved in a positive manner and is more matured now?*

A: Yes, indeed. There are pitfalls of course, but the fact is that in India, for 75 years, we have had elections on the dot, with clockwork precision. India is not only the biggest democracy, it is like all 50 countries of Europe plus North America going to polls at the same time. Yet we conduct elections peacefully, with finesse and perfection. Never have our elections been questioned, and every time the transition of power has been seamless. That is the intrinsic maturity of our democracy.

Of course, there are some issues like criminalisation of politics, and very poor representation of women in our legislatures. The representation of women in Parliament is still around 15%. We have issues of corruption and illiteracy. But one positive thing that has happened recently is the passage of the long-pending bill on women's reservation. When it comes into operation in 2029, which I think it will, our ranking will surely improve.

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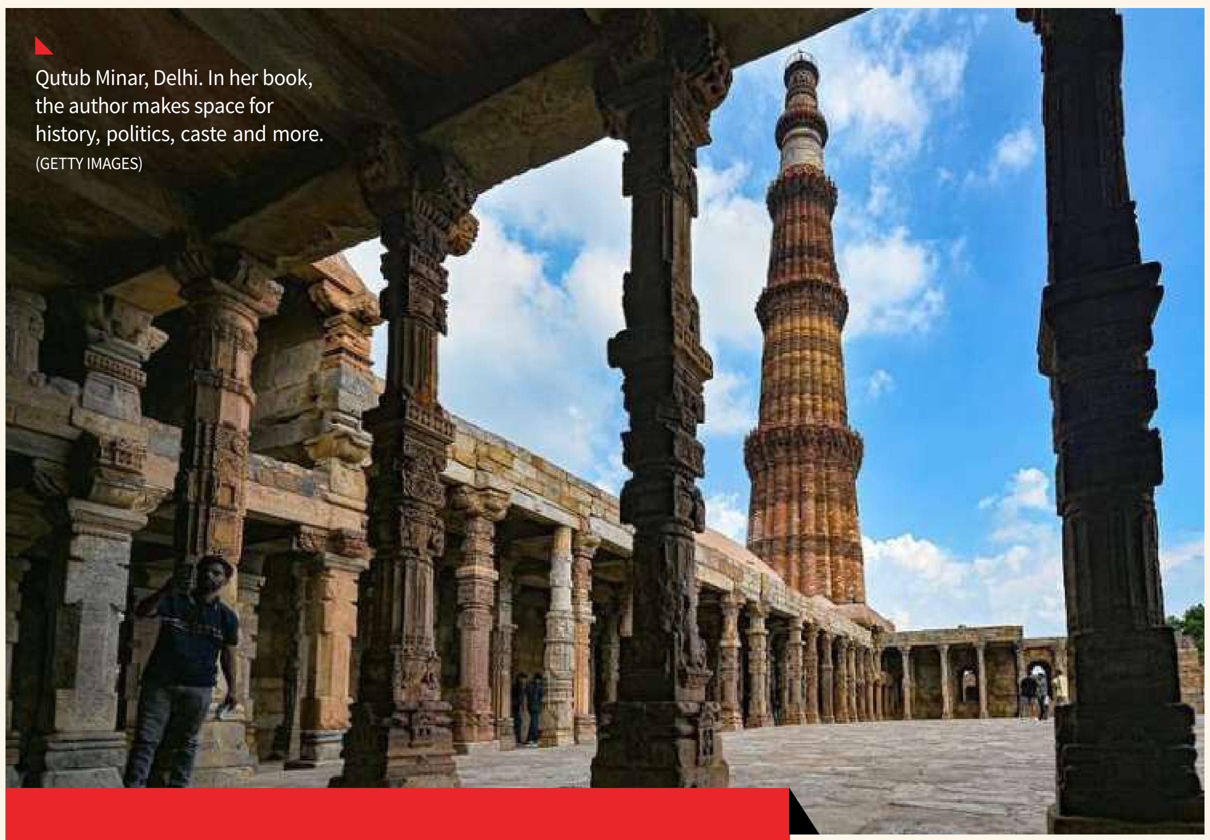


Qutub Minar, Delhi. In her book, the author makes space for history, politics, caste and more. (GETTY IMAGES)

Bundle of contradictions

Once the political and cultural centre of India, the States that comprise the Hindi heartland are now anchored to restrictive social ideas

Noted author Ghazala Wahab's *The Hindi Heartland: A Study* has a lot going for it. Her previous book, *Born a Muslim*, was a runaway hit. Consequently, she can be sure that a section of her readers will pick up this book too. If we take the region – the proverbial cow belt – she puts in the spotlight, it's a sizeable population we are talking about. The Hindi heartland spreads across the States of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar and accounts for 42.2% of India's population.

She foregrounds the contradictions of the region in the Introduction. "The popular idea of India in terms of religion, language, culture, fashion, food, entertainment, and politics emanates from the Indo-Gangetic plains," Wahab notes, and yet it is one of the most impoverished areas in the country. The social backwardness of the region is the consequence of both its politics and economic backwardness, she points out, and explains why the Hindi belt is anchored to restrictive social ideas.

A mosque story

But even those who claim to know the Hindi heartland well will be in for some pleasant surprises. Wahab's book packs in a lot of information, and nuggets of history and society while opening a window to their world.

The author pays a visit to one of those medieval-era mosques which dot Delhi. The Quwwat-ul-Islam Masjid, she writes, quoting historian Ruchika Sharma, was initially called Jami Masjid, or a site for Friday prayers.

Today, like the Qutub Minar, it's a contested site. Wahab informs readers about the mosques but gives them the freedom to draw their own conclusion.

Her canvas is vast, and she makes space for history, the freedom struggle, Emergency, caste, hate politics and the rest. The long section on history is a formidable one. She looks for stories often brushed under the carpet. She describes in detail the intricacies around Shivaji's coronation.

The last Mughal

She also reveals that the last Mughal, Bahadur Shah Zafar, was a reluctant rebel against the British. After initially refusing to meet the sepoys who had marched from Meerut on May 10, 1857, Zafar met them two days later. "With that foolhardy act of courage, he made a place for himself in history. Zafar not only became the leader of the resistance, but also the last Mughal, finally placing the shroud on the corpse of the empire."

Engaging as the history section is, it is when Wahab examines the caste system and its varying shades in the Hindi heartland that she takes the discourse a notch higher. "Caste is an overriding religious and socio-economic reality in India, with the Hindi belt having its own peculiarities," she writes. Like Jats seeking to be counted among the Shudras in Uttar Pradesh and upper castes elsewhere. Or the Tyagis asserting their upper caste status yet being uncomfortable with Muslim Tyagis in their midst. Caste is contagious. Caste follows wherever you go, even the so-called Sanskritisation is a reiteration of the hierarchy. Wahab's narrative is multi-layered. Patiently, she distinguishes between the impact of caste in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh; and the subtler shades among Muslims.

A divided region

From Marathas and the Mughals to caste inequities, she traverses to the present. "The Hindi belt, which was once referred to as the fountainhead of the Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb* (refined culture), is an extremely divided region. Forget coexistence, even tolerance is in short supply," she writes. More than seven decades after Independence, the Hindi heartland, which was once the political, social, economic, and cultural centre of India, is finding its expression in the rigidity of religion, caste and social hierarchies, which is affecting its economy too, says Wahab.

Reading *The Hindi Heartland* is like slicing a watermelon in a family where each member picks a favourite portion. Some may like the section on history, others the bit on Emergency and the RSS, or the one about temples. But each slice, or chapter, contains nourishment for the mind.

The Hindi Heartland: A Study
Ghazala Wahab
Aleph
₹999

QUICK-SERVICE DELIVERY OF MENTAL HEALTH

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Sen says she doesn't blame parents because there is a lot of judgment around parenting today, pressure for them to perform – to send children abroad to study, to 'fashion' perfectly right-brain-left-brain-balanced children who are also socially conscious. "Therapy is often sold as packages of say, three sessions. But therapy takes time. I tell parents, 'I don't know how many sessions it will take'," she states.

Another fall-out of this need for speed is the self-pathologising and labelling that comes with the access to knowledge, especially micro-doses of information from social media through Reels on Meta or Shorts on YouTube. "There is a lot of the victimhood discourse online – this notion that we are fragile, broken, that my parents have wronged me. It is focused on the 'I'," Sen explains.

But good mental health comes from seeing ourselves as part of an ecosystem and to build a network of people, takes time. Instead, we are focused on "the tyranny of the 3 Ts: trauma, triggering, toxic" as Sen puts it. These call for quick action: identify people who may have caused some hurt (trauma), take (toxic) people out of life, act or react immediately to something that is triggering. All this can cause isolation, loneliness, and the loss of a sense of agency.

COVID-19 also perpetuated the idea of the home as a hub, drawing us further into a cocoon with work-from-home. Our 10x10-ft. rooms were drawn up as the only safe space, and while it

For people like me who are prone to mental health issues, the real-time feedback can cause anxiety. For instance, when I'm not stressed and it shows an elevated heart rate. Then I begin to wonder why

YAMEER ADHAR
Entrepreneur, who uses a Whoop band to track his sleep, stress, and heart health

was then a physical boundary, it has come to be a psychological one now.

Slow and fast therapy

Wysa follows "rule-based algorithms and large language modelling (LLM) to listen and respond intelligently". While an LLM learns from its interactions with people and will validate what the individual user says, rule-based algorithms are generated with a human team. In this case, of therapists and conversation designers who anticipate scenarios, work with how they are seeing people online respond to prompts, and tweak responses.

Aggarwal says Wysa has been through over 800 micro iterations, with many manual content inputs from studies and books. She gives an example of a tweak they made to the algorithm. "Say a spouse has cheated. While 'reframing a thought' is part of cognitive behavioural therapy [which focuses on changing negative thoughts to positive], we found that people didn't want to reframe. So, they would say, 'He never loved me' or 'I have been used'," she says. Through people's conversations with the bot, therapists found that what a cheated-upon spouse was looking for was control rather than positive emotions. So, new prompts were fed into the system.

A pathway for high-risk scenarios (self-harm, abuse, trauma, suicide ideation) is triggered if Wysa's system senses it. "Earlier, we worked on explicit risk, like a person saying, 'I want to take my life.' Now, we are working on implicit risk, where someone may say something like, 'I have lost my job' and then also say, 'Where is the nearest bridge?', for instance," she says. They will be launching their third iteration next month.

Clicking to cope

Popular non-invasive devices that claim to bust stress and help improve sleep

- **Apollo Neuro:** A wrist or ankle wearable that can be customised for intensity and duration of vibrations that the company claims "melt tension, sharpen clarity, and guide you to deeper, more restorative sleep". ₹58,300 (approximately)

- **Sensate:** Worn on a lanyard on the chest, this mouse-shaped pendant emits sounds and vibrations that "destress your nervous system, in just 10 minutes" according to the company website. Starts at ₹36,200

- **CalmiGO:** This handheld device claims to help turn off the body's fight-or-flight reaction by stimulating four senses: smell, sight, hearing, touch. It helps regulate breathing patterns, extending exhalations; vibrates at the end of an exhalation; has scents; and works by positioning it at the mouth, much like an inhaler used for asthma. Starts at $199

- **Ozlo sleepbuds:** Ear inserts that block noises that could disrupt sleep. The buds track sleep parameters, can stream audio that switches off when it senses a person has gone to sleep. They also have an in-ear personal alarm. $299

- **Therabody SmartGoggles 2nd Gen:** To be worn across the eyes like a regular sleep mask, this comes with three settings of vibrations (constant, pulse, wave), a heating and massage function, and Bluetooth connectivity for sound. $219.99

- **Muse S Athena:** A headband that claims to track brain activity with EEG sensors and give users real-time insights into brain health and ascribe a brain recovery score. It also has meditation coaching and sleep tracking. $474.99

- **Hugimals' weighted plushies:** Much like weighted blankets, some of these toys can be wrapped around parts of the body, to relieve anxiety. Starts at ₹4,100

** Products have not been tested or recommended by* The Hindu

Suparna (name changed to protect privacy), a Bengaluru-based freelance writer and editor in her 50s, uses the LLM-model DeepSeek and ChatGPT to help her through interpersonal interactions. "Over the last four to five years, I became increasingly convinced that I was autistic, but struggled at first to find professional psychological support," she says. Suparna read deeply from scientific research, books, and blogs, and went to a doctor for a diagnosis. "I was diagnosed with adult autism." Now, she uses AI as a "sounding board to help decode social interactions" so she doesn't end up over-thinking. It gives her a pause "before my mind runs away".

She is also highly aware that an LLM is "not a thinker, but just a parser or sentences". She uses it in tandem with a human therapist and medication. "I would be very vulnerable if I didn't have access to these and it can be dangerous if you're on the precipice of a dark place," she says, realising its shortcomings and patterns that can sometimes misguide or reach wrong conclusions or forget a running thread. "It doesn't substitute for humans and you can't depend on it, so I don't believe everything it says. It works if you're honest with yourself."

Dial a device

Many AI therapy chatbots are free of cost until a certain level. Devices come at a substantial cost, most priced over ₹20,000. But people invest in them because some of the factors that feed into mental health, such as stress, anxiety, and sleep, can all be tracked with devices, by regular folks unconnected to medicine.

Rohan Dixit, who trained as a neuroscientist with Stanford and Harvard universities, combined his own experience with anxiety and depression as a teenager and his mother's meditation practice to launch the wearable from Lief Therapeutics (the company of which he is the CEO and founder) in 2018. Lief, a device to be worn discreetly on the upper half of the body, works on biofeedback. Dixit calls personal devices like his own "training wheels" that help the body sense itself and then "self-correct". Eventually, as the body gets used to listening to itself, actions will come naturally.

Some worry, however, that the training wheels won't come off. Yameer Adhar, 39, a Dubai-based entrepreneur who lived in Delhi for many years, uses a Whoop band that's connected to an app, which records nine metrics, including sleep, strain, and heart health. As someone who has experimented with biohacking (using lifestyle changes to self-help and change the body), he's wary about getting addicted to it though.

"The phone has become an extension of the arm, so I don't want to be dependent on another device," says Adhar, who wrote the book *Voices in My Head* in 2020. "For people like me who are prone to mental health issues, the real-time feedback can cause anxiety. For instance, when I'm not stressed and it shows an elevated heart rate. Then I begin to wonder why." So he doesn't keep the device connected to the app all the time so he's not constantly checking it.

With the lack of delayed gratification, devices too become impulse purchases that may not get used to their full potential. Adhar, like Suparna, has a human therapist, too. While he talks about how AI bots can sometimes be more efficient than humans, he feels it's not a substitute. He knows from personal experience though that health – both mental and physical – takes time to build, with "time, effort, and sacrifice".

25 YEARS OF PLURALITY OVER PRESCRIPTION

Mumbai's Tao Art Gallery says hurrah to multiplicity and diversity through a rigorously curated intergenerational show

Sanjukta Sharma

The ambitious commemorative show of Mumbai's Tao Art Gallery's 25th year titled *Gateways and Pathways* reminds me of the somewhat banal, but liberating fact about our post-truth, AI-trusting age: that no one is ordinary. Every story, every creative ferment, every point of view is valuable and meaningful.

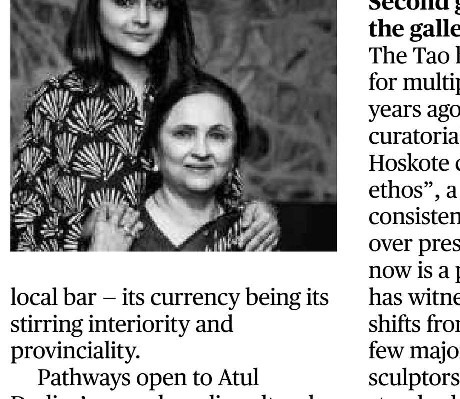
In its essence, in the most uplifting way, the show also presents what's liberating about this 'everything-matters ethos' because the multiplicity makes possible the flourishing of pluralities. At a guided tour soon after the show opened at Jehangir Art Gallery (now on display through October at Tao), the show's curator, Ranjit Hoskote, points out how paradoxes and juxtapositions inform it. "But all we asked the artists invited to participate was that they be intensely themselves," he emphasises. The paradoxes and juxtapositions emerge from the distinct stories and artistic positions of each artist.

GDP to middle-aged men

The artists' individual agency and flair stand out. Take for example, the most pop of installations, *GDP and Urban Legends Like That*. Pedestrians from the street with their workaday rucksacks and mobile devices, perambulated the work with scrutiny and amusement. The artist behind it is Kisalay Vora, whose journey began by making charcoal murals in the small Kutch town Mandvi before he established himself as a major public art pioneer in Mumbai.

Vora binds inexpensive, planet-hostile plastic in garish hues into a mammoth street cart. The work questions what the GDP actually reflects, and who it leaves out. It critiques the illusion of growth that celebrates rising numbers, simultaneously extolling the ingenuity and endurance of those who thrive within the informal economy. When the nation talks numbers, streets talk survival, Vora seems to say.

Move a few steps away, and there's an encounter with the legend, Himmat Shah – a bronze and terracotta sculpture, with Shah's signature elongated human head motif. A few steps forward, Sudhir Patwardhan's painting of melancholic faces of middle-aged men huddled together at what looks like a



local bar – its currency being its stirring interiority and provinciality.

Pathways open to Atul Dodiya's encyclopedic cultural references, Baiju Parthan's hybrid digital assemblages, and Jayasri Burman's mythological narratives. Gateways lead to Manish Pushkale's archaeological abstractions, Viraj Khanna's textile-inspired collages, and Dhruvi Acharya's psychologically potent urban narratives.

(Clockwise from left) Veer Munshi's *Between Freedom and Stardom – The Libra Journey*; Kisalay Vora's *GDP and Urban Legends Like That*; Jayesh Sachdev's *Navagunjra*; Kalpana and Sanjana Shah; and Ranjit Hoskote.

Second generation at the gallery

The Tao has always made room for multiplicity. Founded 25 years ago by Kalpana Shah, the curatorial vision embraces what Hoskote calls Tao's "hospitable ethos", a space that has consistently chosen plurality over prescription. From 2000 to now is a phase in Indian art that has witnessed the most decisive shifts from the dominance of a few major painters and sculptors, and from monolithic standards of what Indian art is or should be. Tao has showcased a wide range of practitioners, many of whom straddle the domains of art, popular culture, activism, and various subcultures.

Like some other art establishments in Mumbai, like Art Musings and Saffronart, Tao's 25th year is also the year the next generation takes the story forward. Sanjana Shah, the second generation at the gallery, brings her vision to fruition with this show. "I love artists that can flow through mediums, and a lot of my new artists like Jayesh Sachdev and Viraj Khanna work simultaneously with sculpture, painting and textile," she says. "This dexterous ability to be versatile is what I'm looking to

focus on more. I also believe that the concept of self now cannot be separated from the art we create and view. So we hope to facilitate conversations around art as a preserver of culture and identity, art as therapy and a means of introspection."

Gateways and Pathways is packed with energy, surprise and fun, with artists who make putting oil on canvas look like an exquisitely refined pursuit, as well as artists who stand out because of their penchant for the odd and the lovely-ugly. And beneath the multi-perspectivity there's a fragility to the show – some of the art would probably not be worth a second look if they weren't so playful mixed up. That mix shows us how intergenerational can be such an affirmative, forward-looking impulse in formal art patronage.

The writer and critic is based in Mumbai.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

Suresh Menon

THE NEW GODS OF TENNIS

While the Big Three era of Federer, Nadal and Djokovic is hard to beat, GenNext has found fitting successors in Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner

Two's company, three's passé
(From far left) Roger Federer; Rafael Nadal; Novak Djokovic; (below) Spain's Carlos Alcaraz (right) beat Italy's Jannik Sinner to reclaim World No. 1 ranking at the 2025 U.S. Open. (CREDIT: AFP, REUTERS AND GETTY IMAGES)

Sport, like nature, abhors a vacuum. Sometimes, there is a brief interval between eras that feels like a vacuum, when one generation has gone or is lingering without impact, and the next is yet to establish itself. Always looking for the next Big Thing, we settle on some names hoping these would head the new era.

Ironically, as soon as such players establish themselves, the search is on for their successors. Doubtless, tennis fans are already asking: who after Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner? Alcaraz is 22, Sinner, 24.

When he won the 1985 Wimbledon at 17, Boris Becker was younger than the junior champion Leonardo Lavalle. When Michael Chang won the French Open four years later, he was even younger. But neither led an era. The essence is not in statistics, it is in aesthetics. In the way a player occupies our imagination, not just our television screens. Sport is a palimpsest, each era writing over the last. Björn Borg's backhand is in Novak Djokovic's muscle memory, Roger Federer's forehand whispers to young players honing their craft. John McEnroe's touch lives on through Alcaraz.

The Borg-McEnroe era ended with Borg's retirement at 26. McEnroe tried hard to persuade the Swede to return. Great players need great rivalry. "I felt there was a void," McEnroe said later, "I felt it was up to me to manufacture my own intensity thereafter." This is from Tim Adams' *On Being John McEnroe* (2003) which, along with John McPhee's *Levels of the Game* (1969), is among the finest books on tennis.

Three for the price of two

Essayist William Hazlitt observed that prose style is the most accurate gauge of manners, morals, and the direction society is taking. Each era of sport awaits the writer who captures it close-up. We are yet to see the definitive book on the Big Three. For a combination of statistics and aesthetics, the era of Federer, Djokovic and Rafael Nadal who collectively won 66 of 84 Grand Slam titles, will be hard to beat. Federer wasn't all touch and grace, Nadal wasn't all power and pace. Each had elements of the other two in some degree. We got three for the price of two, unlike the generation that venerated Pete Sampras-Andre Agassi, Chris Evert-Martina Navratilova, Steffi Graf-Monica Seles, or Margaret Court-Billie Jean King, Rod Laver-Ken Rosewall.

A Serb, a Spaniard and a Swiss ruling the game is also the story of a sport moving away from its U.S.-Australia-Sweden moorings. Now we have Sinner, the first Italian to be world No. 1, born and brought up in the Alpine province of South Tyrol most of whose inhabitants are, like Sinner, German-speaking ethnic Austrians. Sinner has said he feels "100 percent Italian", even if he grew up speaking German. Future historians will see the new era as one of fluid nationalities, although that's not new in tennis. Czech star Jaroslav Drobný won Wimbledon in 1954 as an Egyptian citizen, and returned years later as a British player.

The show must go on

Already, the new generation has a moniker: Sincaraz. No one called the earlier generation Fedalvic. That would have been an inelegant word to associate with those champions.

Not often is the end of an era the beginning of another. In 2023, Djokovic lost the Wimbledon final to Alcaraz; the next year, for the first time since 2002, none of the Big Three won a single Grand Slam title. The transition was complete. The odds of Djokovic adding to his record 24 titles have reduced appreciably. Yet, the fact that he made it to the semifinals of all four Grand Slams this year might suggest that Sincaraz face little competition in the immediate future.

There is, too, the Aryna Sabalenka-Iga Swiatek generation, although among women the domination isn't as marked. Swiatek is 24, Sabalenka 27, and they are the only players to have retained a Grand Slam title since Serena Williams repeated her U.S. Open win in 2014. In the 2015-25 period, only five players apart from the Big Three – Stan Wawrinka, Dominic Thiem, Daniil Medvedev, Alcaraz and Sinner – have won a Grand Slam title, while 20 women have done so.

The obvious conclusions hold: there has not been a version of the Big Three among women. The field is more varied, women play three-setters which makes it difficult to get back into a match, and champions lose more regularly. Women's champions have come from Italy, Germany, Spain, Latvia, Denmark, Japan, Poland, Romania, Canada, Czech Republic, Belarus besides the U.S., Australia and Britain. The range is good for the sport.

Hitting on the rise

According to the International Tennis Federation's 2024 Global Tennis Report, more people are playing tennis than ever before, the figure crossing 100 million for the first time. Identifying with a home champion or looking up to a universal figure like Federer stirs ambition anywhere.

The rise in numbers is significant. Tennis was once the preserve of those who could afford leisure. It kept social divisions intact. It was a game played on manicured grass. You sliced your backhand and cucumber with equal delicacy.

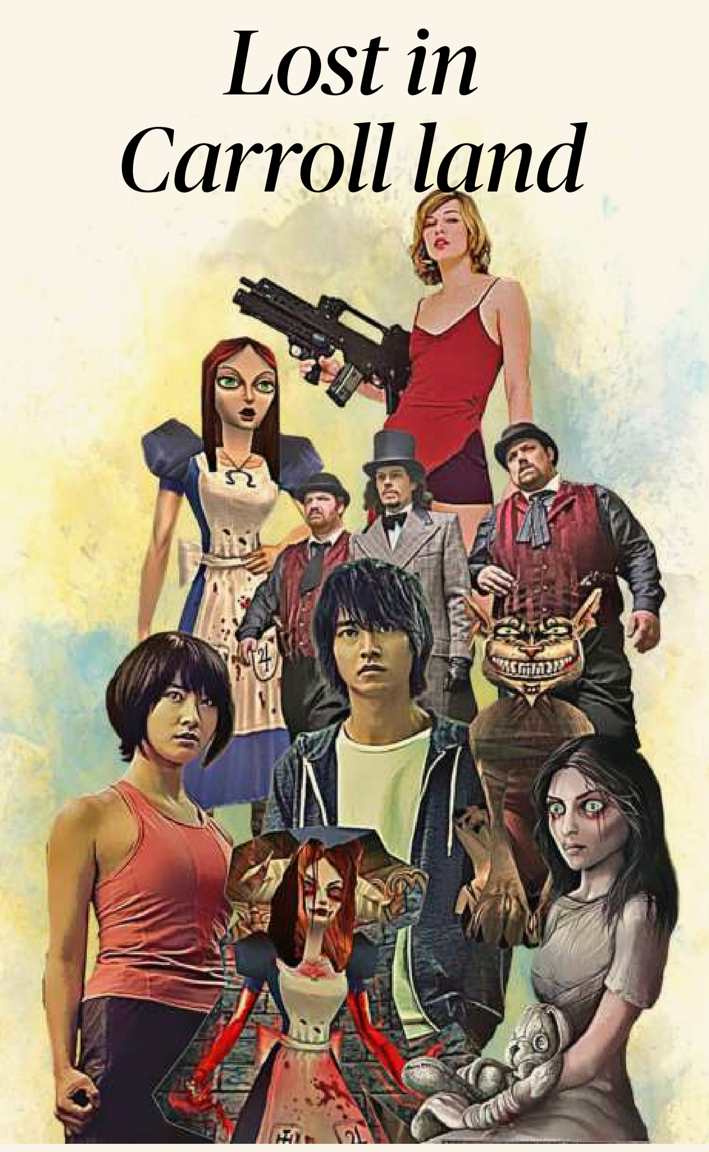
Delicacy is not a word you would use in connection with a modern professional game. Robust, perhaps, tough, uncompromising. If Alcaraz or Sinner sliced cucumber the way they sliced their backhand, it would not be wise to sit across them at the food tent.

After his U.S. Open victory, Alcaraz told Sinner, "I'm seeing you more than my family." Sinner, fearing he's becoming predictable, says he's changing his game. A new era comes with new promises. None more delicious than Alcaraz continuing to see more of Sinner.

The writer's latest book is Why Don't You Write Something I Might Read?

BINGE WATCH

Lost in Carroll land



Screen tributes to Lewis Carroll's phantasmagorical worlds have kept Alice fresh in our memory, 160 years on

On September 25, Netflix released the third and final season of its popular Japanese sci-fi thriller series *Alice in Borderland*. The show's protagonist, the lonely, video-game obsessed Arisu (Kento Yamazaki) is trapped in a dystopian version of Tokyo (*...the Borderlands*) alongside his friends as they are forced to participate in a series of sadistic games styled after various cards from a deck. Essentially, the show serves up gnarly, blood-soaked kills and non-stop cliffhangers a la *Squid Game*, wrapped up in rapid-fire riddle-dialogues. Every episode has the narrative ebb and flow one typically associates with a well-made, high-concept video game. This is as close to 'gamified' television as you'll ever get.

And yet, even more than video games, the principal stylistic influence on the show is (as its name suggests) Lewis Carroll. Several characters are named after their Carrollian counterparts – Arisu himself is Alice, of course. His fellow player, ally and later, romantic interest, Yuzuha Usagi (Tao Tsuchiya) corresponds to the White Rabbit (*usagi* is rabbit in Japanese). The enigmatic player calling himself Chishiya is the Cheshire Cat, and so on. It's incredible that the book that continues to inspire creators and artistes from around the world is going to complete 160 years soon: *Alice in Wonderland* (first published in November 1865). Films, books, TV shows, video games; Carroll's iconic work has quietly influenced a whole lot of 21st century pop culture, across media.

I was first exposed to a Carroll-inspired work in my teen years, in the early 2000s, when the action-adventure video game *American McGee's Alice* was getting rave reviews for its imaginative character re-interpretations from *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). *American McGee's Alice* (and its sequel) presented players with a grim, pessimistic version of Carroll's world, and had them navigate the heroine through a series of monstrous creatures and tricky puzzles which, in true Carrollian fashion, deployed rhyming verses and wordplay. In 2007, the British comics writer-artist Bryan Talbot released *Alice in Sunderland*, an experimental work of graphic non-fiction which explored Carroll's links with the history of north-east England's Sunderland area – as well as broader themes of myth-making and storytelling. One of the most interesting sections of this book explores how Carroll mined local myths and legends, and tweaked them for a juvenile audience. Jabberwocky's character, for example, has certain common elements with 'the Lambton worm' legend, indigenous to the region.

Today's streaming era has seen several TV shows borrowing from the *Alice in Wonderland* lore. The Batman universe's minor-villain pair Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum and the more prominent supervillain the Mad Hatter, who speaks in rhyming couplets like his Carrollian namesake. On the Fox TV series *Gotham* (2014-19), the Mad Hatter was played by a suitably deranged-looking Benedict Samuel (Owen from *The Walking Dead*, 2010-22). The *Resident Evil* film franchise (2002-16), too, has several storylines inspired by Carroll's work, as does the cult thriller series *Lost* (2004-10), which named its third-season finale 'Through the Looking-Glass'.

Alice in Borderland succeeds in presenting these perennially popular characters in new-old, novel-but-recognisable skins. In most of the aforementioned books, films and shows , the Carrollian influence was used to signify mystery or intrigue. *...Borderland* makes a conscious choice to lean into the horror aspects of Carroll instead – essentially, a higher-budget version of the same move *American McGee's Alice* did all those years ago. Towards the end of season 2, one of the villains tells Arisu, 'Life is just a game that we play with ourselves' and that line neatly summarises the nihilistic world view of *...Borderlands*.

Then, is the beloved children's classic *Alice in Wonderland* secretly a horror story? The answer is both yes and no. Carroll wished to move away from the preachiness of his era's children's literature. He believed children didn't need protection or condescension from their books, in addition to the adults in their lives. He wanted to create a text using mathematics, logic, puzzles alongside nonsense verse and pantomime silliness – the polarity was rather the point. Therefore, if adult readers find horror in these stories it is because of the unvarnished weirdness of Carroll's characters, which he refused to dumb down for the kids.

Carroll would have rather enjoyed *Alice in Borderland*, especially the scene where a character is forced to hack off their own leg in order to survive.

***Aditya Mani Jha** is a writer and journalist working on his first book of non-fiction.*

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GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 17

FACE OF THE MOMENT

When every single minute is spent in self-promotion and personal brand building

Hello readers. Due to unforeseen technical reasons, namely, I forgot to send my column in time to the newspaper, I was unable to partake in our usual japes last fortnight. Please excuse this tardiness. It will not happen again. I think.

I hope all of you were able to cope with my absence somehow.

So, onwards and upwards.

These last few days, I have been reminded of an unforgettable incident from my childhood. This story goes back some 35 years. When I temporarily relocated to Kerala from Abu Dhabi, I spent those two years in a school near Irinjalakuda. Have you been there? Very handsome place.

Once every few months, a photographer would visit the school. And we would all assemble in various formations for official photographs. You know the drill. Class photo. House photo. Class monitor photo. Karate club photo. NCC photo. Scouts photo. Photography club photo. Et cetera.

The first time I was part of this jamboree, I noticed that one of my teachers posed in every photo in a particular way. For the sake of anonymity, let us call him Mr. Johnson.

Mr. Johnson would pose normally like everyone else. And then just before the camera clicked, he would move his left arm up and hold his chin as if he was deep in thought. And then he did it again. And then again. I noticed this. But thought no more of it.

Then a few months later, during another photography session, he did it again. So I asked some of the other students.

"Oh you don't know?" they asked in surprise.

"No!" I said. "Please explain. I am deeply intrigued."

"Please don't use words like 'intrigued' just because you are an NRI."

"Never again. Please accept my penitence," I said.

Then they took me to one of the corridors in the school and showed me a row of photographs along the wall. "Look at Mr. Johnson. What do you see?"

In every single photo, he was standing in exactly the same way. Like a Steve Jobs of the Malabar.

"He is showing off his watch," they said. "He has a brother in the Gulf who sends him new watches."

Turns out, dear readers, that Mr. Johnson's greatest passion in life was getting photographed with his watch collection. Every time a camera passed within 10 metres of his body, he immediately found a way to shove his arm into the photo.

A few weeks ago, I was reminded of dear old Mr. Johnson. Not once, but over and over again.

So there I was on X (formerly Twitter), keeping abreast of the latest updates from the most mentally stable people in the world, when suddenly I saw a long post by someone. They were analysing latest developments in the field of India's Goods and Service Tax. And accompanying the analysis was a picture of someone dressed in impeccable formal clothing standing in front of a window and looking into the distance.

Was that someone the Prime Minister? No. The Finance Minister? No. Anybody involved with GST? No.

It was a picture of the author himself.

There was no need for this photo whatsoever.

Then a few days later, I was on LinkedIn, once again consuming updates from absolutely normal people, when I saw a very long and heartfelt post about the ongoing inhumanity in Gaza. And attached to this post was a photo of the author sitting at her desk in the office intensely typing something into her computer. There was a cup of coffee at her elbow. The photo was clearly taken by a professional.

Once again, there was absolutely no need for this photo whatsoever. This is an extremely irritating trend. And we need a word for it. I call this tendency: boretrait.

Example sentence: "Amrita's heartfelt LinkedIn post about unemployment statistics was completely undermined by her 'boretrait' showing her enigmatically flipping through a copy of Plato's *Republic* while sipping a Matcha latte."

Friends, I am afraid many people are no longer capable of doing anything without including a boretrait. Every single minute of every single day must be spent in self-promotion and personal brand building. Not even the abandoned multitudes of Palestine will be spared.

Boretrait
/'bɔːrtreɪt/
noun
Definition: A photograph of oneself strategically inserted into posts about serious or unrelated topics, serving no purpose other than self-promotion and personal branding.
Related forms:
Boretraiture: (noun) The systematic practice of inserting unnecessary self-portraits into social media posts
Boretraitist: (noun) A person who habitually creates boretraits
Boretraited: (adjective) Describing a post that has been contaminated with an unnecessary self-portrait

Sidin Vadukut lives in London and is currently working on a new novel. He blogs at www.whatay.com.

GOREN BRIDGE

Good eggnog

East-West vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

It was late in the evening and this was the last rubber at the club for the night. Celebrating the holiday season, South had been enjoying the club's excellent eggnog, with some especially good "nog" in it. He picked up the lovely South hand in today's deal and excitedly opened two clubs. South got a little too excited when North jump raised his suit, forgetting for the moment that the jump, while promising at least three spades, also denied holding an ace or a king. South should have settled for game, as even finding the queen of hearts in dummy would only assure him of 10 tricks. Full of the joys, not to mention the egg nog, he leaped bravely to slam.

Dummy had some useful features and there was a play for the slam. Should East have king doubleton of spades, and at least three hearts, South could make it. A heart ruff, a trump finesse, the ace of trumps, and another heart ruff would give him 12 tricks. He won the opening club lead, cashed the ace and king of hearts, and ruffed a heart. He led a spade to his queen, winning the trick, but was alarmed when West discarded. He now needed East to have the last heart, so he could ruff in dummy, without being over-ruffed, and then use that entry for another trump finesse. South led his last heart and was disappointed to see the 10 from West. Rather than ruffing, however, he discarded a diamond from dummy. Bingo! He ruffed the club continuation, ruffed a diamond in dummy, and repeated the spade finesse for 12 tricks. Well done.

NORTH
♠ 7 6 5 3
♡ J 2
◇ 9 6
♣ Q 8 7 5 2

WEST
♠ Void
♡ 10 8 4 3
◇ K J 7 5 2
♣ J 10 9 4

EAST
♠ K 4 2
♡ Q 6 5
◇ 10 8 4 3
♣ K 6 3

SOUTH
♠ A Q J 10 9 8
♡ A K 9 7
◇ A Q
♣ A

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
2♣	Pass	2◇	Pass
2♠	Pass	4♠	Pass
6♠	All pass		

Opening lead: Jack of ♣

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

I spy with my little eye

British author Ian Fleming flanked by artwork from his famous novels. (GETTY IMAGES)

Berty Ashley

1 On October 5, 1962, this film was released in the U.K. It was the first of a series, which, as of now, comprises 27 films. All of them are based on the novels by real-life intelligence officer Ian Fleming. Titled *Dr. No*, it was responsible for introducing what iconic phrase while introducing the main character of the series?

2 The CIA is constantly developing tools for its agents to use in the field. During the Cold War, a top-secret manual was written by John Mulholland. It was a guide on trickery and deception. What profession was Mulholland involved in to give this information?

3 Renaissance-era scientist, Giambattista della Porta used to send secret messages to his imprisoned friends using a commonly found object. He would write on its outer shell with invisible ink. Since the shell was porous, the ink was absorbed into the item inside. The receiver just needed to break the shell and read it. What item is this?

4 The CIA is based in Langley, Virginia, which has more than 20,000 employees. There is one store run by a company famous for writing down the names of the customers (famously misspelling them many times). This outlet is the only one where they don't ask for a name or even a number, as it could lead to their identity being uncovered. Which store is this?

5 This powerful person has a very distinctive way of walking, where he doesn't move his right hand at all. Known as the Gunslinger's gait, this is due to his experience as a KGB agent carrying weapons for many years. Who is this person?

6 During the Cold War, Russia was able to identify a huge number of American spies, thanks to a very subtle but important device. Those used by Russians would leave a light brown rust stain, whereas the ones used by Americans were high-quality and rust-proof. What tiny item important for documentation was this that gave away the Americans?

7 North Korea had/has a programme where they kidnap and hold regular people from Japan, France and Romania. Although not spies who can provide information, they are made to provide another service to train the North Korean officers. What service is this which helps them understand the world better?

8 John Scobell was a former slave who had educated himself and earned his freedom. When the Civil War broke out, he worked undercover in the South with Confederate officers. What racial prejudice of the officers allowed him to gather information and pass it to the North?

9 In 2024, Mumbai police captured a 'spy' and kept the spy under arrest for eight months because of 'flight risk'. What tipped off the police were strange markings on a ring around the leg. Later, it was discovered that it was an ID tag for a racing team in Taiwan. What 'spy' was this that had a bird's eye view of Mumbai?

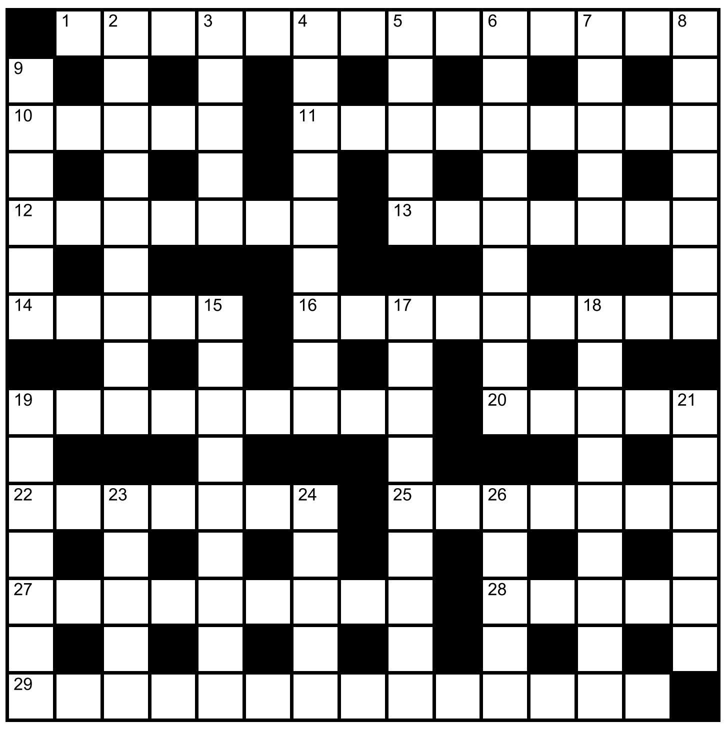
10 There are certain words known as 'Shibboleth' which, when pronounced, can be used to identify a certain community. American soldiers used this word to identify Japanese spies, as they would mispronounce it as 'Rorrarooza'. What word is this that excites music fans in India every year?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. The name is Bond, James

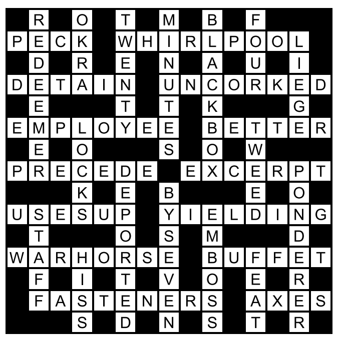
THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 24 (Set by Arden)



Across
1 Morning meeting of influential people might stop quickly (5,9)
10 Liable to gather essential idea from expert (5)
11 Third bomb blast - also twice outside the famous test site (3,6)
12 Spindle diameter providing fast movement inside (7)
13 "Island in part" — a musical review (7)
14 Bad smell? Chop head off fish (5)
16 He was philosophical about 14 size (9)
19 Insult to church, shape to be altered (5,4)
20 Loves speed, get-up- and-go (5)
22 Blister means hearts go for spades (7)
25 Greek Goddess's gift, giving out half (7)
27 Bones broken — team on pitch is recalled (9)
28 Perfect inside a laundry (5)
29 Follow direction, then play around with girls — it's a natural phenomenon (8,6)

Down
2 Be nice - so a criminal gets respect (9)
3 Old painting hung up additionally (5)
4 Bird having a fill perhaps amid the flowers (9)
5 Chides for the lack of time, becomes moderate (5)
6 Ex-president before a menagerie in U.S. city (9)
7 Student essentially comes in the morning, it becomes own (5)
8 Having the will, say to support those disheartened... (7)
9 ...and getting in touch with the criminal (6)
15 Hard work to score in a game (9)
17 Hormone details or composition (9)
18 Cat hides hand, say, when it's used to catch mice (9)
19 Beginning with Charlie and Victor — name picked up by our ancestor (4,3)
21 Bother with high sales output (6)
23 Instrument in transit, arriving shortly (5)
24 Merry sort, no covers, one slip (5)
26 Connecting it perhaps when height is unknown (5)

SOLUTION NO. 23



Writing a dirge for handwriting

In today's digital world, the simple act of writing notes by hand feels increasingly rare

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ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

At the bank recently, I was asked to submit a written letter for closing my account. What should have been a simple task turned into a surprising challenge. My handwriting, once steady and familiar, looked uneven and squiggly. It dawned on me that I had not written a letter by hand in decades, as most of my communication these days happens through WhatsApp or email. Rarely do I put pen to paper.

The shift from handwriting to digital text began with the rise of computers in the late 20th century. Word processors replaced typewriters, and as the Internet and smartphones became widespread, typing quickly became the norm for everything – emails, essays, messages. The speed and convenience of digital communication are undeniable. One can edit, share, and store text more efficiently than ever before. But this ease has come with a trade-off.

For generations, handwriting has been a fundamental part of education. Schools used to dedicate entire periods to handwriting. There were notebooks with red margins, teachers with hawk eyes, and the dreaded four-line rule. One misguided 'g' would invite the teacher's wrath. Learning to shape letters and form words marked an important developmental milestone. Handwriting was not only a means of communication but also a vital tool for learning and cognitive development.

In today's digital world, however, the simple act of writing notes by hand feels increasingly rare. Yet it remains a powerful and personal way to connect – with us and with others. Though the need for handwriting may be fading, it has not vanished completely. It still holds value as a human art form, worth preserving and celebrating.

Growing up in the early 1950s, long before smartphones and Internet postcards became a cherished means of communication, postcards were not only a symbol of travel but also a lifeline between friends and family. We eagerly awaited the daily arrival of the postman, hoping for a letter from a loved one. There was unmatched joy in receiving a handwritten note, and these moments kept our writing skills alive. Postcards, with their limited space, also sharpened our ability to express thoughts concisely.

In today's world of instant messages, photo-sharing apps, and social media updates, the process of choosing a postcard, writing a personal note, and mailing it feels almost antiquated. But its disappearance marks more than the end of a nostalgic tradition, reflecting the decline of handwriting itself.

The downfall of the postcard began with the telephone and accelerated with the Internet. Now, a traveller simply snaps a photo, adds a filter, and shares it instantly with the world. The classic "Wish you were here" has become a caption, not a handwritten message.

The art of handwriting is disappearing not because it is no longer useful, but because we have forgotten its value. Yet, in its quiet beauty, it remains one of the most personal forms of expression we have. It deserves not just remembrance, but revival.

Ingesting the wrong variety

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Having a proper healthy lunch is fast turning into a luxury. School and college students and office-goers sadly do not have the luxury of a hot meal during lunch breaks. A hot dinner again is a luxury to many.

Are our children and the young eating the right food? The answer is 'no'.

While there is much debate on malnutrition among the poor with many going without a proper square meal a day, even those who can afford food are not eating the right food. Youngsters mostly relish the ultra-processed food that would taste hot and wonderful instantly, tickling the taste buds, little realising the ill effects it would bring in later years, potentially harming them in their formative years. Markets are fully stacked with packaged food items in attractive packages, sold across the length and breadth of the nation.

A regular intake of such packaged food items can be extremely harmful. Pizzas, burgers, and French fries are ordered online for easy door deliveries and are consumed with a worrying regularity. Ice creams and cold drinks can also damage health. There are also roadside snacks such as *pani puri* and *chaats* consumed on a regular basis. Such foods can affect the appetite for a good lunch and dinner. Can tender stomach and intestine withstand the spice and salt of such food?

Schoolchildren are the worst hit, as the snacks available in small sachets and affordable prices are purchased by them with the little pocket money. They cannot be blamed, as long, lengthy school timings and the small tiffin boxes make them turn to shops for chips, samosas, snacks, and *pani puris*.

Diabetes and respiratory issues are commonly seen among the young today. Once associated with old age, they are now seen in the younger population. Consumption of junk food and the modern-day food habits are crippling them.

Poor nutrition could make them weak. Gone are the days when grandmothers and mothers would ensure a balanced diet using balanced ingredients. Food used to be prepared with the utmost care, with menus suiting the seasons.

What's more appalling is the fact that the vegetables and fruits we consume on a regular basis seem to have lost their fragrance and taste. They look big and beautiful, but seem to have lost their goodness.

A home for strays

Any decision to place them in an organised set-up should be welcomed

Vijay Shekhar
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Ferocious packs It's very difficult to ascertain whether strays are vaccinated or not. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

I am often asked a classic modern-day lifestyle question: Are you a cat person or a dog person? I am neither. And if you have one or more of these pets, please keep them tied up when I am around.

When I say that I am not a pet or animal lover, I want to reiterate that neither am I a pet or animal hater. I do not consider pet lovers to be unlawful or criminal. At the same time, I abhor their mindset of considering those who are not pet or animal lovers to be immature who need to "grow up".

In my college days, I had gone to a batch mate's place one evening. Just to have some "unharmful fun" (according to them), they let the dog on me. I jumped from the sofa to the bed to the teapoy and back to the sofa with the dog following and pawing me. The host family was laughing. The dog did not bite me, which the family was confident about. But anything could have happened to me in that fear. I could have fallen and injured myself.

The sad part is that just like my batch mate's family, a majority of pet lovers have chosen to ignore the plight of those who are not pet lovers. Another category of animal lovers are those who do not have them at home, but shower all their love on strays. When they feed the strays, they do not realise the disturbance they cause to traffic and pedestrians. There have been several accidents on account of this "feeding". If anyone tries to shoo away strays being treated to food by an animal lover, he invites the ire of the dogs and a "see I am doing such a great service" look from the animal lover.

It's very difficult to ascertain whether the strays are vaccinated or not. Given this scenario, any decision to put strays in an organised set-up should be welcomed. It's about giving them a home, taking care of them and not letting their lives go astray. It's a win-win situation.

Away from the din

Noise cancellation in life doesn't mean isolation from society. It means clarity

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ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

The sleek pair of earphones on a traveller's ears is not just about music; it's about technology's clever promise, delivering only what we want to hear and filtering out everything else. Various companies have perfected this art of noise cancellation, filtering out unwanted sounds so the listener can enjoy pure music.

But pause for a moment and ask if life itself is not in desperate need of this feature? Noise cancellation!

Every day, we spend a surprising amount of mental energy not on productive work or joyful moments but on distractions that creep into our thoughts. Unknowingly, we allow ourselves to be consumed by what others say, how they behave, or even by imagined judgments. This bundle of thoughts drains our vitality, leaving us dull by the end of the day.

Often, it is not the big issues of life that affect us, but the small, repetitive disturbances. A bus or cab or train delayed by a few minutes makes us restless. I have seen householders grow visibly tense upon hearing that the maid will be late or absent, as though the entire day is already ruined.

Worse still, many people almost seem to wait for reasons to get irritated. A car zooming past them on the road, a stranger violating traffic rules, or the weather refusing to cooperate, be it continuous rain or scorching sun, are enough to trigger frustration.

And then there is a noise we carry with us. Many bring stress from the office into their homes, and and take domestic frustrations to the workplace. This leakage of mood from one space into another magnifies unhappiness, creating a cycle of irritation that never really ends. Without boundaries, we allow professional pressures to invade personal life, and small family tensions to disrupt our work.

Digital noise

Adding to all these is the constant blitz of digital noise. Social media feeds, biased opinions, outrage, and addictive content on weight loss, crypto money, healthcare, these toxic ingredients are consumed every day. The more we feed on these toxins, the more our minds become restless and unhealthy. Slowly, they distort our thought process altogether, making it harder to focus on what truly matters.

This is the "noise" of daily living. And just as audio pioneers designed circuits to cancel out noise, we too can train our minds to cancel out these mental interferences. Imagine filtering them before they creep into us, by accepting small delays, ignoring careless remarks, avoiding comparisons, digital toxins to dictate our state of mind.

Noise cancellation in life doesn't mean indifference or isolation from society. It means clarity. It means choosing not to hand over the control of our emotions to outside events. When we learn to filter distractions, we save our energy for what truly matters.

By practising selective attention and conscious detachment, we can develop the art of cancelling life's noise. Noise cancellation may be the greatest life skill we can learn to live authentically.

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

The future of Indian women's cricket is promising with the WPL boosting visibility, income, and opportunities. ('22 yards of her own'; Sept. 28) Grassroots-level training, better infrastructure, and corporate sponsorship will give more access to girls from small towns and rural areas. Professionalisation, financial support, and continuous tournaments will enable Indian women's cricket to dominate globally while empowering thousands of young women across the country.

N.S. Reddy

Indian women's cricket has grown manifold thanks to the contributions of Harmanpreet Kaur, Smriti Mandana, Mithali Raj, Deepti Sharma, and others. Kaur's Becoming a cricket player in this competitive age is truly incredible. Best of luck to the women in blue.

Sravana Ramachandran

One of a kind

The Kunj's guiding principle, with emphasis on building local capacity and winning world-wide recognition, is in sync with the spirit of Swadeshi 2.0. ('The Kunj: house of craft'; Sept. 28) Improving exposure to our great handicraft traditions will encourage more people to buy Indian products and thus uplift local artisan communities. .

N. Rama Rao

The Kunj has emerged as one of the most prominent and well-regarded craft houses. During my visit, I was able to directly engage with its diverse exhibits, which provided a meaningful experience of India's artisanal heritage.

Arif Kanjirappuzha

Recharging in the hills

The article was an interesting read. ('Spacehouse and the creative uncommons'; Sept. 28) Who does not want a villa in the hills? It is for anybody who loves solitude, nature, and dreams to be in a space where the body, mind, and soul are aligned with the surroundings.

Sajna Hameed

Valuable insight

G. Sampath's humorous insight on confrontations with stray dogs made for interesting reading. ('If you stray into dog land'; Sept. 28) Understanding canine behaviour and conquering fear of dogs will help to tackle dangerous encounters with strays.

Monita Sutherson

Good initiative

It's heartening to read about the success of the library movement initiated by the IAS official. ('Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta: libraries of change'; Sept. 28) At a time when information is just a click away, the fact that people throng the library for reading is encouraging.

Varsha V. Shenoy

A word of advice

A feud between two persons starts due to a misunderstanding or a display of egoistic attitude. ('When two sisters split a village'; Sept. 28) . In our society, which thrives on gossip, it is rare to find a Phuphee to play a good samaritan to listen, counsel and rescue relationships.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Not against love, just afraid
Why so many young Indians are hesitating to marry
Sandra Joseph

Mind and body
No amount of money can save a body that is going downhill due to a lack of discipline
Thomas Paul

If resilience had antennae
Cockroaches are shadowy reminders of what it means to adapt, survive and thrive against the odds
G. Gayatri

A bridge called sorry
An apology does not undo past, but disarms bitterness
Sanjeev Kumar

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The 78-year-old institution teams up with Chennai-based label Kaveri to give the heritage handloom a modern makeover

GANDHIGRAM TRUST'S KHADI RESET

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Khadi is having its moment on the runway. While Indian designers such as Rajesh Pratap Singh, and Shani Himanshu of 11.11/eleven eleven have given it a contemporary spin, the handloom has also caught the fancy of international designers. Earlier this year, British designer Vivienne Westwood's first-ever showcase at Mumbai's Gateway of India spotlighted the textile, in addition to Chanderi and handwoven silks. In March, the Fashion Design Council of India collaborated with designer Samant Chauhan and the Centre of Excellence for Khadi to present a khadi-based womenswear collection at Moscow Fashion Week.

Closer home, at Dindigul in Tamil Nadu, a silent khadi revolution has been ongoing for decades – courtesy of the Gandhigram Khadi and Village Industries Public Charitable Trust, established in 1947. At the helm were T.S. Soundaram Ramachandran and G. Ramachandran, both followers of Mahatma Gandhi who wanted to promote rural development based on Gandhian ideals. While the Trust began as a community focused on health, education, sanitation, and khadi, the handloom became their core pillar.

The Trust stays true to khadi's handspun and handwoven authenticity, and keeping the fabric relevant for the current generation has been a priority. The latest step in this direction is a collaboration with Chennai-based apparel brand, Kaveri, which is known for its linen creations. The Trust's deputy CEO Shibu Shankaran says the initiative is envisioned as the "pilot of a series of partnerships with designers and brands".

"We see this as a way to showcase the versatility of khadi by allowing different creative voices to interpret it. Each collaboration will explore a different design language, audience, and approach," he says. The new collection, *Songs of the Spindle* (₹5,000-₹8,000), features co-ord sets, dresses, *kurtas*, and jackets – with hand-printing, embroidery, dip dyes and shibori, and Kaveri's signature prints and gold foiling techniques.

First of many collabs

Founder Kaveri Lalchand says she has known Gita Ram, chairperson of the Crafts Council of India (CCI) – and who has been associated with the Trust for over a decade as its managing trustee – for several years. So, when Ram approached Lalchand to create a collection with khadi on behalf of the Trust, she jumped at the opportunity. "When you think of khadi apparel, you picture basic shirts, *kurtas*, and simple outfits. We wanted to take it to the next level with our contemporary cuts, techniques, and colours." For her colour palette, Lalchand veered away from the material's traditional earthy finish and worked with shades such as lilac, tangerine orange, and blue.

Elaborating on the design approach the team took, Aditi Jain, head textile designer at Gandhigram Trust, says understanding Lalchand's design ethos such as her preference for fluid, elegant silhouettes and subtle detailing, was key. "We then developed textiles that aligned with this vision: natural dyes in ombres, engineered placements of tie-dye motifs." The partnership also gave the team at Gandhigram "an opportunity to learn, refine, and tighten our own processes", Shankaran explains, "so that we can align more effectively with the contemporary fashion world". That learning came by way of understanding techniques that work with khadi. For instance, the team of 150 artisans explored surface treatments with natural dyes and tie-dye techniques like clamp-dyeing and stitch shibori. They have now invested in a cabinet dyeing machine for dyeing hanks of yarn, which increases their "capacity, reduces inconsistency, and frees up our artisans to explore surface treatments". With this infrastructure in place, Jain says they are now in a much stronger position to scale up natural dye surface treatments, which they plan to make available for future collections.

> When you think of khadi apparel, you picture basic shirts, *kurtas*, and simple outfits. We wanted to take it to the next level with our contemporary cuts, techniques, and colours
>
> KAVERI LALCHAND
> Founder, Kaveri

> I was always told that khadi is a loss-making fabric. The early fervour it enjoyed post-Independence has worn off over time. We want to get khadi out of this mould. Such partnerships are the way forward
>
> GITA RAM
> Chairperson, Crafts Council of India

Contemporary edge Designs from the 'Songs of the Spindle' collection; and (bottom) artisans at the Gandhigram Trust. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Climate-friendly wear

While many designers and boutiques already source fabrics from the Trust, this project marks a more deliberate exploration into structured, long-term collaborations with design houses. Ram of CCI says, "I was always told that khadi is a loss-making fabric. The early fervour it enjoyed post-Independence has worn off over time. We want to get khadi out of this mould." Initiatives such as the collab with Kaveri also help boost sales, and ensure weavers remain employed. "It's important to keep our weavers happy, so they are encouraged to continue working on the art form," says Ram. "Such partnerships are the way forward."

In an effort to connect better with younger, more sustainability-conscious audiences, Shankaran states that they plan to launch digital campaigns, collaborations, and experiential events on khadi. "We want to shift the perception of khadi, not only as an eco-conscious fabric but also as climate-friendly wear," he says.

Expanding the weaving community

The focus at Gandhigram Trust will continue to be on their textile experiments – weaving techniques, dyeing processes, fabric blends – to make khadi more adaptable to contemporary fashion needs. "We are extensively working with natural dyes and expanding our palette to include a wide range of plant-sourced colours. Eco prints have been our most recent exploration, especially using locally available flora such as marigolds, cosmos, guava leaves, and teak leaves. We are also sourcing handspun slub yarn from Maharashtra to experiment with different textures, and exploring different weave structures including combinations with naturally dyed indigo denim and wool."

Going forward, Shankaran states they will look into ways to expand the weaving community "by training people from outside traditional weaving families, including middle-aged women and others interested in learning the craft". This will not only help sustain khadi, but also open up new avenues for livelihood and inclusion.

The new collection will launch on October 8 at the Kaveri store, Chennai.

Salt, combs and memory

Subodh Gupta, Suchi Reddy and other global voices weave history and contemporary art at the inaugural edition of the Bukhara Biennial

Neeta Lal

The first thing that strikes you in Bukhara, a UNESCO Creative City of Craft and Folk Art, is how the present treads lightly across deep, slow history. As daylight softens, honey-hued domes and *madrasas* glow, and the lanes stir with whispers of the caravans that once threaded the Silk Road.

It is precisely this layering of time – spiritual, mercantile, and domestic – that the inaugural Bukhara Biennial, *Recipes for Broken Hearts* (September 5 to November 20), seeks to reckon with. It unfolds across restored historic sites, and with over 70 site-specific projects created in Uzbekistan by more than 200 participants from 39 countries, it marks Central Asia's largest cultural event.

Commissioned by Gayane Umerova, chairperson of the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF), and curated by Diana Campbell, the Biennial is an immersive, multisensory experience. Internationally renowned artists, master Uzbek makers, and early-career voices converge to ensure that contemporary practice enriches rather than displaces the city's fabric.

"For centuries, traditions from all corners of the world have commingled in Bukhara," reflects Campbell. "*Recipes for Broken Hearts* revitalises extraordinary sites by placing them back into the pulse of life."

Shaped by the city

About half-a-dozen Indian artists have made their presence felt at the Biennial. In the labyrinthine courtyards, Subodh Gupta collaborates with local craftsman Baxtiyor Nazirov on *Salt Carried by the Wind*. Vast mounds of coarse salt, punctuated by suspended vessels and glinting utensils, refract the desert light. Gupta – whose name is synonymous with the alchemy of found kitchen objects and monumental scale – has crafted an installation that mirrors local architecture. "Salt has always fascinated me – it carries stories of survival, trade, and ritual," says Gupta. "In Bukhara, where the Silk Road once pulsed with life, I wanted the material to speak of journeys, both intimate and global."

Layered dialogues (Clockwise from above) Works by Subodh Gupta; Nomin Zezegmaa; and Kamruzzaman Shadhin. (COURTESY OF UZBEKISTAN ART AND CULTURE DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION)

Nearby, architect Suchi Reddy softens the Gavkushon Madrassah, a revered 16th century heritage site. Her *Patterns of Protection* is a suspended canopy inspired by *ikat* traditions and woven in collaboration with artisan Mallika Berdiyarova. Sunlight filters through the fabric into filigreed patterns on stone, turning the courtyard into a living manuscript. "I drew from *ikat*, which is both of Uzbek origin and part of my South Indian heritage," explains Reddy. By using the motif of the comb – a symbol of protection, abundance, and fertility – she creates not just a canopy but a dialogue between histories, textiles, and people.

Water as witness

In Bukhara, a ritual performance summoning water takes place every full moon. On the night of September 6, artist and writer Himali Singh Soin and composer David Soin Tappeser stage *The Rising of the Full Moon* beside a *hauz*, or pool. Electronic drones mingle with the brassy wail of Uzbek trumpets, summoning cosmic tides, ecological fragility, and ritual memory.

There are quieter interventions, too. Shakuntala Kulkarni, known for exploring women's inner worlds, has collaborated with choreographer Arundhati Chattopadhyaya and Bukhara Philharmonic musicians on *Intimate Conversations*. Performed in a caravanserai, the piece unfolds like a series of confidences – gestures, breaths, and fragments of song – softened into a hush.

Letting the local lead

Bringing an international event into an ancient city requires care – restorations have to be respectful, commissions collaborative, and the bustle of tourism balanced with the rhythms of everyday life. "I saw artists use our old spaces in ways that felt surprising and respectful. For locals, it is a chance to feel proud, to see our traditions not as something of the past, but as a living conversation with the world," says Dilafruz Karimova, a resident.

Walking through the city with the Biennial as a guide is to relearn translation: between past and present, global and local, visitor and resident. In the hush of a *madrasa*, Gupta's salt catches the light; beneath Reddy's canopy, new meanings stitch into old patterns; by the *hauz*, Soin's music ripples like prayer.

In a world that often parachutes culture into cities for spectacle, the Bukhara Biennial reminds us that context matters. Here, contemporary art is asked not just to speak – but also to listen. And in a city that has always been at a crossroads, that listening may be the most radical act of all.

The senior journalist and editor explores the intersections of art, culture, gastronomy and travel.